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R U L E

O F

Self Examination ;

O R,

The only Way of Banishing

Doubts and Scruples,

A N D

Directing the Conscience in the Satisfac-
tory Practice of all *Christian Duties*.

By the most Reverend

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The R U L E of Self-Examination, &c.

TH A T it is the Duty of every Man often to make a strict Enquiry into all his Actions, in order to repent of whatever he has done amiss for the time past, and to amend his Life, for that which is to come; is readily by all Christians acknowledged to be the Voice even of *Reason* as well as *Holy Scripture* (1 Cor. xi. 28. Lam. iii. 40. Gal. vi. 4.) and therefore at present shall be taken for granted.

Now when at any time a Man sets himself to this great Work of *Self-Examination*, there is but one single question that is absolutely necessary to be put upon every *Action* or *Omission*, as they come in their order before him; namely, *Is this [Action or Omission] a Sin?* For if it be a Sin, I am bound not only to supplicate for God's Pardon, if I find my self to have been guilty of it; but also to watch carefully for the remaining part of my Life, that I do not again run into the same: But if it be no Sin at all, I remain at my Liberty to do as formerly I have done, without any other Restraint upon me, but that of common Prudence.

The only Rule whereby to know whether

any thing (be it an Action or an Omission, or whatever else you may call it) is a *Sin*, or not, is to bring it to a Tryal by *God's Law*. For *Sin* is nothing else but *the Transgression of the Law*, 1. John iii. 4. and where no *Law* is, there is no *Transgression*, Rom. iv. 15. Nor would it be a *Sin* to disobey the *Law of Man*, if God by the *Law* either of *Reason* or *Revelation* had not commanded us (as indeed he has done by both) to *be subject to the Higher Powers*, Rom. xiii. 1. And to *submit our selves to every Ordinance of Man for the Lord's Sake*, 1 Pet. ii. 13.

That I may therefore offer some Assistance to every Man, who needs it, in a Work of so great Importance, whereon the Peace of his Conscience, and his Eternal Salvation do in a great Measure depend; I shall endeavour to shew.

First, What the *Law of God* is, and how upon all Occasions we may come to the true Knowledge, and a right Notion of it.

Secondly, What it is to *transgress* this *Law*; and wherein such *Transgression* does alone consist.

Thirdly, How, and after what manner, we may best proceed in trying thereby whether any Action or-Omission be a *Sin*, so as to avoid all Perplexity and Delusion.

As to the first of these Things; However some may a little differ from others in Words or Expressions; yet as to the Sense and Meaning, all Men do agree in this Definition of the
Law

Law of God, viz. *The Law of God is nothing else but the Will of God, as far as it is intended to be the Rule of our Actions.*

When the Will of God is intended for a Rule of his own Actions, we call it his *Decree*. Thus it was his *Will* or *Decree* to create the World, to create Man after his own Image, to send his Son to take our Nature upon him for the Redemption of Mankind.

When the Will of God is intended as a Rule to the Actions of necessary Agents, we call it the *Law of the Creation*. Thus it is his *Will*, or, in other Words, the *Law of the Creation*, that the Sun should give Light and Heat, that the Seasons of the Year should return at their certain Periods, that Herbs and Plants should grow, and bring forth such proper Fruit or Seed as is agreeable to their several Kinds, and that all Living Creatures should receive such and such certain Shapes in the Egg or Womb wherein they are conceived and nourished.

But when the Will of God is intended as a Rule to the Actions of Voluntary Agents, who have in themselves a Power of choosing what they will do, or forbear to do, we call it the Command, or *Law of God*, in the strict and proper acceptation of the Word *Law*. Thus it is God's *Will*, that is to say, his Command, or *Law*, that we should Love, Honour, and Fear Him above all things; that we should love one another; that we should not Murder, Steal, or commit Adultery; but be Just, True, Sober, and Temperate in all our Actions.

Now the Way whereby we come to find out this *Will*, or *Law* of God [which we are to take for the Rule of our Actions] is twofold, viz. *Reason* and *Revelation*.

They who wanted the Assistance of *Revelation*, might yet (and many of them accordingly did) by the help of *Reason*, discover the Being and most principal Attributes of God ; as being plainly to be inferred from the various Works of the Creation, and the Beautiful as well as Useful Structure of the World: *Because* (says the Apostle) *that which may be known of God is manifest in them, for God hath shewed it unto them. For the Invisible things of him from the Creation of the World are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made ; even his Eternal Power and Godhead, Rom. i. 19, 20.*

And when we have thus discovered ; As we may do by *Reason* alone ; that God, who made the World, and all things therein, is most Just, True, Wise, Powerful, and Beneficent ; It is easy from hence to gather, even to a Demonstration, that it is his *Will* that we, who are his Rational Creatures, should love and reverence him above all things ; do all the Good we can one for another, and make no other use of any of his Creatures but that for which he has put them within our Power : Or in other Terms, *that denying Ungodliness and Worldly Lusts, we should live Soberly, Righteously, and Godly in this present World. Tit. ii. 12.* And the *Will* of God, as far as it is thus

to be found out by *Reason*, and farther traced in its several Branches even unto particular Duties, is what we call the *Moral Law* : Of which, as thus discoverable by our own Natural Understanding, the same Apostle speaking, tell us, that *when the Gentiles which have not the [revealed] Law, do by Nature the Things contained in the Law ; these having not the [revealed] Law, are a Law unto themselves, which shew the Work of the Law written in their Hearts, their Conscience also bearing Witness, &c.* Rom. ii. 14, 15.

But because the Light of *Reason* in most Men is very dim ; and God also has thought fit to prescribe some *Laws* unto Man, beyond what Reason alone could ever possibly discover : He has farther made known his *Will* unto us by *Revelation* in the holy Scriptures : Wherein he has again repeated all the Precepts of the *Moral Law*, and also thought fit to superadd some Sanctions of meer. *positive Institution* ; That is to say, for which no other Cause or Reason can be assigned sufficient to lay an Obligation upon the Consciences of Men, but only this, that it is God's free and arbitrary Pleasure or *Will* ; And such *Laws* as these, for distinction sake, we commonly call by the Name of *Positive Laws*.

Of these *Positive Laws* a great many were given to the People of *Israel* ; as they remain still upon Record in the *Old Testament* ; But the Obligation of them all is taken away by our Saviour *Jesus Christ*, who has *blotted out* the

the Hand-writing of Ordinances, and taken it out of the way, nailing it to his Cross, Col. ii. 14. But all the *Moral* Precepts that are in the *Old Testament*, together with *all* the Precepts, whether *Moral* or *Positive*, which we find in the *New*; are by all Christians acknowledged to be of standing and perpetual Obligation; And that for this Reason, and none other; Namely, because it is the *Will of God* that we should conform our Practice to them, or that they should be the *Rule of our Actions*; for which Reason we call them the *Laws of God*.

If any Precept then (whether Affirmative or Negative) be at any time advanced as a *Law of God*, let us have immediate recourse to *sober Reason*, and to the *Holy Scriptures*: If from them, or either of them, it can sufficiently be prov'd to be the *Will of God* that we should thus do, or forbear to do, as the Precept requires; then indeed we are bound to receive such Precept, as being *God's Law*, and accordingly to give Obedience to it. But whatever Art or Pains may be used to give a plausible Colour to any thing, if it cannot be prov'd that *such is the Will of God*; It neither is, nor can be his *Law*, being destitute of his Authority; but must be condemned and rejected as an *addition* to it. *Deut. iv. 2.*

And thus I have done with the First thing proposed; which was to shew what the *Law of God* is, and how upon all Occasions, we may come to the true Knowledge, and a right Notion of it. I come now to the

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Second, Which is to shew what it is to *Transgress* this Law, and wherein such *Transgression* does alone consist.

If to *keep* the Law be to *conform our Actions to the Rule which it prescribes*, then to *Transgress* the Law (which is opposite to the *keeping* of it) can signify nothing else but to *depart from that Rule*, or to act otherwise than it directs: And since the Law of God is nothing else but his *Will*, as it is intended for the Rule of our *Actions*; It must follow that the *Rule* of the Law is to be taken not from the *bare Letter* of it; But altogether from its true *intent* and *design*, that is, the *Will* of God, as far as, from the just Interpretation of the Law, we are able to come to the knowledge of it: It being very possible that *less* or *more* may be comprehended in the *design* of such a Law, or rather of God in making the Law, than what seems to be express'd in the *Letter* of it. If the Words of every Divine Precept were *expressly* to extend to each particular Case that is to be ruled by it; The Laws of God must of necessity become so very large and voluminous, as not possibly to be even *remembered* by any Man: Considering therefore that Man is a *Rational* Creature, and thereby able fully to comprehend whatever is plainly *implied* in, or *consequent* from a Law, as well as what is *literally expressed* by it; It is abundantly sufficient for his Instruction in all the Parts of his Duty, that the Laws of God should be set down in few Words and general Terms; Provided that he

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has any proper and certain way of *interpreting* each Law, so as to *extend* or *limit* it, according as the true *intention* of it requires in each particular Case that at any time comes under it.

It will not perhaps be disputed but that the *Rule* of every *Law* of God consists in, and therefore is by us to be taken from, the *design* of it: But then it will be demanded, What other Way have we, besides the *Words* of the Law it self, to find out this same *Design*? Or are we to suppose concerning any such Law, that it has any *other* or *farther* *Design* than what we find to be *express'd* in the very terms of it?

I answer, That the Signification of Words, being not natural or necessary; but altogether *arbitrary*, and sometimes *ambiguous*: And great Changes being often made therein by Use and Custom; If we had no other way of finding out the *Design* of God's Laws, but by keeping close to the *express Terms* wherein they are delivered to us; The Consequence must be, that as often as the *Words* of any of them become doubtful, or receive a change in their Signification, the like Change or Ambiguity must of necessity be derived into the *Law* it self; which is so monstrous an Absurdity, that no Man, I am sure, will ever offer to defend it. It follows therefore that there must be some other Method of finding out the *true Design* of God's Laws, and whereby we may be able to prevent or correct the Errors that too close an Adherence to the literal Signi-

Signification of Words, would otherwise often betray us to.

First then ; As the *Principles of clear and sober Reason*, being of eternal and unalterable *Truth*, do lay us under a necessity not to interpret any *Doctrine* which God has delivered to us, in contradiction to them, or any of them, because two Truths cannot possibly be contradictory one to the other ; so the *Moral Law* (of which I have already spoken) being the unquestionable dictate of *Reason* also, and allowed by all sober Men to be of eternal and unalterable *Obligation*, must needs lay us under the like Necessity of not interpreting any *Law* which God has given us, so as to interfere or be inconsistent with any Duty that is prescribed by it : Because this were to suppose two Laws of God at the same time *obligatory* and yet *inconsistent* ; which is altogether as absurd as that two Propositions should be both *true* and yet *contradictory*. I therefore lay it down as an undoubted Rule, to be always observed on this occasion, That *no Law of God is so to be interpreted as to make the Design thereof any way inconsistent with any Duty which the Moral Law requires from us.*

For Example, The Moral Law requires that every Man, according to his Ability, should by his honest Care and Industry endeavour to put himself into such a Condition as that he may be able to *provide for his own*, 1 Tim. v. 8. and also to give unto him that needeth, Eph. iv. 28. When therefore God gives

gives us a Law that we should *take no thought* even for our own *Life, what we shall eat, drink, or put on*, Mat. vi. 25. no not even for the *morrow*, v. 34. it is manifest that the *design* hereof is not to exclude that prudent *thought* or forecast, which is a *Moral Duty*; but only that *anxious care and thoughtfulness*, which is contrary to the trust and dependence which we always ought to have on God's good Providence.

The *Moral Law* requires that no Man should willingly take away the Life of an Innocent Person, which is *Murder*. Exod. xx. 13. Altho' therefore God has given a Law that we should not *take his Name in vain*, Exod. xx. 7. or *forswear our selves*, but that *we should perform unto the Lord our Oaths*, Mat. v. 33. and that *when we vow a Vow unto the Lord we should not be slack to pay it*; Deut. xxiii. 21. yet if a Man should Swear or Vow to God to take away the Life of any one who is Innocent; All Men do allow that he would not be obliged to keep such an Oath, or perform a Vow of that Sort, altho' he had bound it upon himself by ten thousand Imprecations.

Another Rule to be followed in seeking for the true *Design* of God's Law is this, That *whatever Interpretation he has been pleased to give us of any such Law is always to be received as authentic*; and the *Design* of the Law is to be *extended or limited according to such Interpretation*. The *Truth* of this Rule will not be deny'd

ny'd or disputed by any one who acknowledges God's Infinite Wisdom; and the Use of it will appear by an Instance or two.

Thou shalt do no Murder; Thou shalt not commit Adultery; are two of the known Laws which God has given to all Mankind: Now if we go no farther than to the *Letter* of these Laws, it is evident that no more is therein contain'd but only a restraint from the *outward Actions* which are there forbidden. But if we will take that *Interpretation* of them which God by the Mouth of our blessed Saviour has given us; It is no less certain that they are to be *extended* as well to the *inward Desires* as *outward Actions*: And even to be *angry* with another beyond what there is a just *Cause* for, or to *look upon a Woman to lust after her*, are by the *Design* of those Laws as truly forbidden as *Adultery* or *Murder*, Mat. v. 21, &c. and 27, &c.

Again, *The Seventh Day—Thou shalt not do any Work*, is an express Sanction of another of God's Laws: But tho' the Words [*any Work*] are as *general* as may be, yet our Saviour shews, and proves, that as to the *Design* of them, they are to be understood in a *limited* Sense, so as not to include the Works of Necessity and Charity. Mat. xii. 1, &c. Mar. ii. 23, &c. and c. iii. 1. &c. Luke vi. 1, &c. And the Reasons that he has given for such his Interpretation (*viz.* that *the Sabbath was made for Man, and not Man for the Sabbath*; And that God prefers Works of *Mercy* before the

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offering of Sacrifice ; *Hof. vi. 6.*) are a plain Indication that *Whatever is* [not Moral, but only] *Positive in the Law of God, is not so rigorously to be extended, according to the Letter, as to be inconsistent with those Comforts which he* [by his Moral Law] *most freely allows unto Man, or with that Love and Compassion which all Men* [by the same Law] *are bound to exercise one towards another.* Except there be something in such Positive Law that necessarily requires a stricter Interpretation.

And because it would have been endless in writing to have set down all those Explications of the several Laws of God, which are necessary for the Application of them to that vast variety of particular Cases which daily arise : That we may not therefore be at a loss herein, He has graciously been pleased in some remarkable Places both of the *Old* and *New Testament*, to give us such an Account of the *general tendency of all his Laws*, as may suffice to shew us the *intent* and *meaning* of each of them, if at any time it does not appear to be fully express'd in the Words or Letter. Thus (*Isa. i. 11, &c.*) God seems even to slight *Sacrifices* and *Burnt-Offerings*, with other positive Institutions, altho' of his own Appointing, in respect of *Judgment*, *relieving the Oppressed*, *judging the Fatherless*, *pleading for the Widow*. After the same manner also he speaks *Micb. vi. 6, &c.* and gives his People, by his Prophet, to understand, that the great things which alone he indispensably *requires* from them,

them, as being in themselves *good*, are *to do Justly, to love Mercy, and to walk Humbly with God*. Our Saviour tells us, that the whole *Law and the Prophets* intirely hang upon these two *Commandments*, viz. *The Love of God and our Neighbour*; *Mat. xxii. 40*. And the great end of his coming into the World, we are assured, was *to teach us that denying Ungodliness and Worldly Lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present World*. *Tit. ii. 11, 12*. From which Passages of Holy Scripture, with many others to the same purpose, we may draw this farther Rule, viz.

That the design of every Law of God is so to be understood as may most conduce to the promoting of Moral Virtue and Piety: And To limit or extend any such Law beyond the Letter of it, where such limitation or extention does not tend to promote Moral Virtue or Piety, is altogether a groundless and unwarrantable Presumption. For if such extention, or limitation, is not warranted either *expressly* by the Word of God, or *implicitly* by the general Tendency of his Law; What other Ground can we possibly have so to extend or limit any Law that he has given us?

And thus I have done with the second thing proposed, which was to shew what it is to *transgress* the Law of God, and wherein such *Transgression* does alone consist. To *transgress* the Law of God is to depart from the *Rule* which it prescribes. This *Rule* is to be taken

altogether from the *Design* of the Law : Which *Design* (however the *Letter* of the Law it self may sometimes seem but imperfectly to express it) must always be consistent with all the *Duties of Morality* ; must be limited or extended according as God himself has interpreted it ; must still be so understood as most may tend to the promoting of Moral Virtue and Piety ; And is not upon any other Account to be limited or extended beyond what is contained in the express Letter of it.

I proceed now to the third Thing proposed, which was to shew how and after what manner we may best proceed in trying, by the Law of God, whether any Action or Omission be a Sin, [so as to avoid all perplexity and delusion.]

If you would certainly know whether a Line runs strait, or is [perhaps a little] crooked ; your Eye, if you judge by that alone, may deceive you ; and more especially so, if the Light by which you see is either false or obscure : But place it in a true and clear Light, apply the Rule close to it, and carefully observe its agreement with, or disagreement from it, and if your Eye be not very bad, you will easily discover if there be any remarkable crookedness in it. In like manner, if you desire to know whether the doing or omitting such or such an Action is a Sin or not ; if you pass Sentence upon a slight Observation, or suffer your self to be influenced by your own or other Mens Fancy, Imagination, or Prejudice, you may in many Cases be easily deceived and misled in
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your Judgment. But bring that same Action or Omission to a fair Tryal by *the Law of God* (which is the *only Rule* whereby we are to judge of a Sin) and lay aside all those Prepossessions of Mind which often do arise from other Causes ; And it will not ordinarily be any difficult Matter to find out how far we are to go in our Sentence either of Acquittal or Condemnation. How then, and after what manner this same *Tryal* is to be managed, so as that, in all such Cases, we may frame a sound and just Judgment, is what I am now about to enquire into.

But before I enter upon this Part of my Task, I desire the Reader to observe, that as I take it for granted that every Sin, or Breach of God's Law, must of necessity consist either in the *doing* something which the Law forbids, or *omitting* something which it commands: So do I also freely allow that an *intention* either to do, or omit, is of the same [Moral] Nature, and comes under the same Law with the *Omission* or *Action* it self. But since an Intention to omit, or act, is then only a Sin when the Omission, or Action it self is so ; It will suffice to shew how we must proceed in the tryal of an *Action* or *Omission* ; from the Lawfulness or Unlawfulness of which alone we are to frame the like Judgment of the *Intention* which leads either to the one or the other. Which being premised, I come now to lay down the Necessary Rules that are to be observed in order to make a clear and full dis-

covery whether any *Action* or *Omission*, of which we have at any time a doubt, be really and truly a Sin or not.

If then at any time we have the least suspicion or apprehension that the *doing* or *omitting* of this or that may be a *Sin*; The first thing necessary to be done, in order to the satisfactory determination of the Matter, is to *fix upon some certain Law or Laws of God*, whereby to make a Tryal of it. For since *Sin* is nothing else but *the Transgression of the Law*, it is impossible to know that any thing is a *Sin*, except we also know *what Law is thereby transgressed*: And as it is a great weakness of Mind to imagine that any thing is or can be a Sin on any other Account but this; so without this to endeavour any other way to beget in Men an opinion of the Sinfulness of an Action or Omission, can only serve to perplex weak Consciences, by either leading them into Error, or leaving them at an Uncertainty in Matters of Religion and Duty.

For Example: The Church of *Rome* lays Sin to our Charge because we reject, and refuse to join with them in, divers things which they account to be necessary Parts of the Christian Religion; And they who dissent from our Established Church do bring such another Charge (tho' not altogether so heavy) against us, because we our selves conform, and require their Conformity also to those Rites and Ceremonies which by Lawful Authority are, for Decency and Order's Sake, appointed to be used

used and observed in the performance of Divine Service amongst us : But how do they make good their several Charges ? Why the Papists take great pains to amuse Mens Minds by the false or wrested Notions of *St. Peter's Primacy, The Pope's being his Successor, The Catholick Church its Unity, and Authority residing chiefly in its Visible Head the Pope, and its Representatives in a general Council ; With Infallibility, Tradition, Catholick Faith, Heresie, Schism,* and many more Words and Terms of Art which are frequently brought into Disputation. And on the other side, the difficult Words and Phrases which the Dissenters make use of in their Controversy with us, to me seem to be no less an Amusement, such as *Popery, Symbolizing with Idolaters, Mystical Rites, Significant Ceremonies, Will-worship, Superstition, Human Inventions, making new Sacraments,* and the like : To which if we add the many Scholastick Terms which some Men seem very fond of using even when they handle Cases of Conscience ; such as *Essence, Essential Form, Sacramental Action, Specifick Difference, &c.* it is not to be wonder'd if many are perplext with Doubts and Scruples, many entertain wrong, or at best, but confused Notions of Religion, and many reject Religion it self as a thing impossible to be understood, when they find so great a stress laid upon Words, of which they understand not the distinct Signification. Not that I would at all times condemn such hard or obscure Words,

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which for want of others that are more plain, may sometimes, with Profit to those who are able to understand them, be made use of in Disputations even about Matters of Religion and Conscience : But as the plainest Expressions are generally the best, especially when Men are to be directed in the way to Heaven ; so is it a foolish and absurd thing, by any Words whatsoever, to attempt to prove any thing to be a Sin without assigning some Law of God of which it is and must be a Violation, or else it can have nothing Sinful in it. For *where no Law is there neither is nor can be any Transgression.*

Altho' therefore we have often given a full and abundant Answer to all the Allegations of our Adversaries, and hard Words wherewith they endeavour unjustly to load us ; yet it were enough for us to say, that if they tax us with any *Sin* whether of *Omission* or *Commission*, it is incumbent upon them to assign and point out the *particular Laws of God* that we have broken ; or else their whole Accusation must immediately vanish into Smoak. For altho' it is possible that one single Action or Omission may at once be a Breach of several of God's Laws ; yet to persist in it, that any one is guilty of a Sin, without shewing what Law of God it is that he has broken, is to the last degree Absurd and even Ridiculous.

But since all the Laws of God are now in the Holy Scriptures consigned to us in writing ; and it is possible that more or less may be

be contained under the *Design* of a Law than what appears to be expressed in the *Letter* of it; and moreover also since the *Rule* of the Law (whereby alone all *Sin* is to be tried) consists altogether in the *Design* and not the *bare Letter* of it, as I have already shewn;

From hence arises a Second Rule to be observed by every one who would impartially enquire, whether any particular Action or Omission be a Sin: Which is, that he not only fix upon some particular Law or Laws of God whereby to make the Tryal; But also that he fully and fairly enquire into the Import, Scope, and *Design* of such Law or Laws before he bring the Action or Omission to be proved or tried by the Test of it. For if this be not done, it is evident that the Trial is carried on and made by a wrong Rule, and, consequently it is a meer chance if the Conclusion or Sentence that is past be not altogether false and unjust.

For Example; Let the Question be whether or no it be Lawful under the Gospel on any Account to take an Oath? There is one party of Men whose avowed Principle it is, that to take an Oath upon any Occasion whatever, and even before a lawful Magistrate, is a Sin, and for the Proof of their Opinion they produce the exprefs Command of *Christ* himself, Mat. v. 34, &c. *I say unto you swear not at all—But let your Communication be yea, yea, nay, nay: For whatsoever is more than these cometh of Evil: As well as those of St. James,*

James; *But above all things, my Brethren, swear not, neither by Heaven, neither by Earth, neither by any other Oath.* Jam. v.

12. But if we consider the Nature of an Oath, that *in its self*, if reverently taken, it is an acknowledgment of God's Truth, Holiness, Knowledge, Power, and Justice, and consequently a solemn Act of Honour and Worship paid to him; That under the Mosaick Law it was not only allowed of, but also expressly prescribed, and that in a Controversy of no greater value than a single *Sheep*: Exod. xxii. 10, 11. That it has been openly practised both before and under the Law, and also under the Gospel, not only by the best of Men, but even by the Angels themselves; and this practice recorded in holy Scripture without the least Disapprobation of it: (*Gen. xxi. 24. and 31, 53, and 47, 31. 1 Sam. xx. 42. Rom. i. 19. 2 Cor. i. 23. Dan. xii. 7. Rev. x. 5, 6.*) That even *God* is said to have sworn by himself: *Heb. vi. 17.* And an Oath at the same time, as taken by Men, is spoken of as a Thing not only Lawful, but very fit and proper for the *ending of Strife*: ver. 16. That before the coming of *Christ* the Civil Power had a *right* of requiring an Oath from every Subject as a Security for his Truth and Fidelity in all Cases where the Distribution of Justice, or safety of the Publick required it; Nor does it appear that our Saviour had the least design either of depriving *Magistrates* of any part of their Lawful Right, or rendering the Fidelity or Truth of their *Subjects* less certain,

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or more suspicious than it was before his coming ; And lastly, that at the time of his being upon Earth, it was a received Opinion among the Jews as well as the Heathens, that there was no Sin in customary, or unnecessary, but only in False-Swearing, or Perjury ; If, I say, we consider all these things, it will appear beyond all reasonable Cause of doubt, that the *Design* of our Saviour's Words (and consequently those of St. James, which in a Manner are but a Repetition of them) was not universally to forbid all Oaths whatsoever, but only in common Conversation, or in light and inconsiderable Matters, where to use or invoke the Name of God, was by no Means agreeable to that profound Reverence which we always ought to maintain and preserve towards the Divine Majesty : And if without a sober Enquiry into the *Design* of this Command of our Saviour, we should determine the Case upon the bare *Letter* of it ; it is manifest that our Determination would be altogether erroneous.

This single Instance is enough to shew how necessary it is to make a sufficient enquiry into the *Design* of God's Law, before we conclude from it that any thing is a Sin : But because the discovery of a Sin can only be made by a sufficient comparing of an Action or Omission with the Rule of God's Law, and he that would sufficiently compare any two things together, ought well to understand them both.

From hence arises a third Rule no less necessary

cessary than the two former, in the business upon which we now are, which is, that before we pronounce any *Action* or *Omission* to be a Sin, *we thoroughly consider and well understand the true Moral Nature and import of such Action or Omission*: For as if I do not distinctly see the *Line* as well as the *Rule*; it is not possible for me so to apply it thereto, as sufficiently to judge of its crookedness or straightness; so if I have not a right notion as well of the *Action* or *Omission*, upon which I am to make a Judgment, as of the *Law* which is the only Rule whereby in such a Case I am to judge; there neither is nor can be any rational Grounds upon which I may form my Opinion one way or other: And a Man may as well pretend to determine the Shape and Colour of an Object which he very imperfectly sees at a Mile or two's Distance, as the Lawfulness or Unlawfulness of an Action or Omission, of whose *Moral Nature* he has no clear or distinct apprehension. Or if this Expression [*Moral Nature*] may to some seem a little obscure; By it I mean not only the bare Action or Omission, but also every Adjunct and Circumstance of it, on Account of which it may be supposed to come under the Regulation of any Law of God: Of all which if we have not a full and clear Notion, it will not be possible to distinguish what is really sinful from that which is not so; especially if there happens to be some little *outward Resemblance* between them.

For

For Example ; One Man fighting by a Commission from Lawful Authority, and in a just War kills a publick Enemy in the Field of Battle ; another in a private Quarrel, without any Commission or Authority but his own, kills his Adversary in a premeditated Duel : One Man gives Relief to the Poor upon no other Motive but that of Charity ; another does the like that he may get Praise among Men for the seeming Goodness of his Actions. A Protestant of the Established Church kneels when he receives the Blessed Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, that he may thereby express his Devotion and Thankfulness to God for the Benefit which he receives by this holy Ordinance ; a Papist observes the same posture of Body, that he may thereby adore that very *Host* (as they call it) which he afterwards receives. A serious Man upon a proper Occasion makes use of the Words of Holy Scripture, that he may give a greater weight to his Discourse ; a profane Scoffer affects often to speak in Scripture Phrase, that he may render Religion and the Word of God ridiculous. A Subject kneels and petitions his Prince for somewhat of which he stands in need ; a votary of the Church of *Rome* kneels also and offers his Petitions to the Virgin *Mary*, or some other Saint. One Man omits to give an Alms to a proper Object, because (being not well able to relieve both) he reserves his Charity for one whom he knows to be more indigent ; another refuses to relieve the same

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poor

poor Man, and bestows the Money he should give in Charity upon some trifle or vanity. One Man omits his ordinary Morning Devotion, because some Business of great Consequence, that cannot be deferred, unavoidably comes upon him; another does the like because he is in haste to go abroad upon some Sport or Diversion. It is plain from 1 Cor. x. 25, &c. that Meat which had been *offered in Sacrifice to Idols*, was sometimes after that *sold in the Shambles*, and *set before* the Guests at a Private Entertainment: And among the Christians, who sometimes were *bidden to a Feast* by some of their Heathen Neighbours; one perhaps freely eat of such Food (*asking no question for Conscience Sake*) because he saw no one there present who was like to take any Offence at the use of his Christian Liberty; another, it may be, eat of the same, altho' he well knew that his weak Brother would therewith be offended; and a third possessed with a false Notion that the thing was in it self unlawful, might yet do it even contrary to the Dictates of his own [mistaken] Conscience. Thousands of Instances might be given both of Actions and Omissions which in outward shew have, at the first glance, some Resemblance, more or less, the one to the other, upon which yet we are not to pass the same Judgment; as we should be apt to do if we *judged only according to the Appearance*: But before we pass Sentence either of Acquittal or Condemnation upon them, we must fully consider them,
and

and throughly enquire how far, on what Account, and for what Reason, they come within the compass of any, and what Law of God; and then, and then only, we shall be able in such Cases as these to *Judge Righteous Judgment*, John vii. 24.

And thus I have done with the third thing proposed; the Sum of which is this: If we first fix upon some certain Law or Laws of God whereby to try any Action or Omission; and secondly, enquire into the full Scope and Design of such Law or Laws; and then, thirdly, take a clear and distinct view of the Action or Omission itself, together with all its Adjuncts and Circumstances, as far as they bring it under the Regulation of God's Law (which is what I mean by the *Moral Nature* of it) then, and not till then, we shall be able to discover whether or no it is a Sin, and clearly to distinguish it from other Actions or Omissions, which in outward appearance may seem to have some resemblance to it.

Before I come to point out the principal Uses that are to be made of the Doctrine which I have hitherto been establishing, I must make this one [obvious yet necessary] Remark; namely, that the very same Method, and no other, that is to be observed in finding out whether any thing be a *Sin*, must also be made use of in all our searches and Enquiries, where the Question is, Whether this or that thing be a *Duty*. For as *Sin* is nothing else but the *Transgression of God's Law*, so is *Duty* nothing

thing else but our *Conformity to it*. As then by the due Application of a straight Rule, we as well discover the *straightness* as the *crookedness* of a Line ; so by the careful comparing of each Action or Omission, with the Rule of the Law, we can only be sure whether either of them be a *Duty*, as well as whether either of them be a *Sin* : And if any *Action* be a *Sin*, then to *omit* or forbear that Action must needs be a *Duty* ; and on the contrary, if to *omit* any Action be a *Sin*, then of necessity it must be a Duty to *do* it. In a word, since the *Law of God* is the only Rule of *Moral Good and Evil*, there is no other way but by it to make a Tryal of the one as well as of the other.

The Application of all that I have hitherto said will chiefly concern two sorts of Persons. First, those who hastily venture upon any thing, before they have sufficiently enquired into the Lawfulness of it : And secondly, those who are over scrupulous and fearful lest this or that thing be a Sin, which really is not so.

First, then, how many Men are there in the World, who commonly take the Measures of the principal Part of their Lives altogether from their Pleasure, their Profit, their Passions, or the Customs of this World, without any other regard to the Law of God, except it be to avoid such things as are openly accounted Scandalous : And this itself not really out of Conscience, but only Regard to their Credit and Reputation in the Sight of Men ?

One

One Man endeavours, without the least Scruple, to over-reach another, or takes Advantage of his necessity to screw him up in the making of a Bargain ; not considering that all fraudulent or oppressive Gain is contrary to the *Design* of the Eighth Commandment, and also forbidden in other places of the Holy Scripture. Another divulges whatever he has heard, or even suspects, to the Disadvantage of his Neighbour ; although every such Report, if it be false, is a Breach of the Ninth Commandment ; and although it should prove to be true, yet still may be contrary to that Love and Charity, which God has so often commanded us to practise towards all Men. Another revenges his Quarrel by a private Challenge to his Adversary, without any regard to the Sixth Commandment, or to any of those Texts of Scripture, which expressly forbid Revenge to be executed by any other Authority except that of the Magistrate. Another out of a plentiful Fortune, gives scarce any thing towards the Relief of the Poor ; although no Duty is more often pressed and inculcated upon us by God, than that of Compassion and giving of Alms : And (to omit abundance of other Instances) not only Men, but Women also frequently go to Smutty Stage-Plays, and read or hearken to Books, Poems, and Songs, which (tho' under plausible Words, yet) contain a great deal of Obscenity in them ; notwithstanding that (besides the strict *Purity in Heart* which the Gospel requires from us all)

they cannot be ignorant, that whatever has a *Tendency* towards Lewdness, is most certainly contrary to the *Design* of the Seventh Commandment. And if you ask any of these Persons, why they allow themselves in such sort of Liberties as are by no means indulged by the Laws of Christianity; they think it enough to say that these are the common Practices of the World: That they pass among Men without any severe Censure or Opinion of Scandal, and therefore they hope that either they are no Sins at all; or else such as will very easily be forgiven.

But if such Persons would seriously consider what that *Rule* is by which *alone* they are to be tried at the last great day of Account; it cannot be imagined but they would be more careful than now they are, to form all and every part of their Lives according to it. When we *all* come to *appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ*; the Question will not at all be, how well we have conformed our selves to the Opinions and Customs of the World; But *every one* of us (High and Low, Rich and Poor) must expect to *receive* his Reward or Punishment, as *the things done in his Body*, while he was here upon Earth, shall be found to be; and *according to that he hath done, whether it be Good or Bad*, so must he receive his Eternal Portion of Joy and Misery, 2 Cor. v. 10. And since the *Law of God is the only Rule of Good and Evil*; it follows, that nothing else will then be enquired into, but

but how far our whole Lives have been agreeable to it. Or, because foolish Men are apt vainly to flatter themselves, that the *general Judgment* is very far off; let us take a View of what we are sure is very near, and perhaps much nearer than we imagine; I mean our *Death-bed*. When we come to have but a few Hours or Minutes (as now but a few Years or Days) to live in this World, and Death in all its Terror, is making its nearest approaches to us; what is it which then can bring us Comfort; or ease us from those Agonies and Afflictions, which at that time generally, we find, do strongly possess the Minds of most Men? A Man has all his Life long passed for a very accomplished Person, and according to the Modes of the World, has lived in great Credit among those whom they call *the better Sort*; he has increased his Fortune, lived gently, compassed his Designs, and defeated his Adversaries; and all this without any Publick Scandal or Blemish on his Reputation for any thing which *Men* commonly account to be base or dishonourable: But alas! *The fashion of this World passeth away* (1 Cor. vii. 31.) And now that he is just leaving it, and looks back upon it, he has a very different Notion of all its Trifles, from what he formerly used to deceive himself with; nor can any thing relieve him in this distressed Condition, if his Conscience does not bear Testimony to him, that his Life has been such as to render him a

proper Object of God's Mercy and Loving-kindness. In a word ; let Men shift and turn as much as they please, and seek for never so many vain Pretences ; there is nothing which can make a Death-bed easie, or give us the least Confidence or Hope of Reward or Acquital before the Judgment-Seat of *Christ*, if we have not taken that Care which God requires from us, to lead our Lives according to his *Law* ; which is the only Rule he has given us to walk by, and for our Observation of which alone he will certainly call us to a strict and severe Account. Let us then in time consider this matter with that Seriousness which the Importance of it deserves, and while God is pleased to allow us yet some Days upon Earth, let us diligently set our selves both rightly to learn, and carefully to keep and observe the same *Law*, as the only supreme and indispensable Rule of our whole Lives ; to which all other subordinate Rules, however otherwise in themselves innocent, must for ever give place, whenever there arises any Competition between them : And let us again and again assure our selves of this great Truth, and always keep it in mind, That *no Custom or Fashion, no common Practice, or even Authority, in the whole World can render any thing innocent, or be a just Excuse for it, if it be found to be contrary unto any part of that Law* (rightly understood) *which God has given us as a constant Rule to walk by.* Much more might be said to press this Matter ; but indeed it is
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in itself so very plain, that a reasonable Man needs no more but barely to be put in mind of it.

But before I dismiss the Persons of whom I am now speaking, I think I ought *expressly* to mention, and rank among them, all those who seem to make very little or no Account of the Sins of *bare Omission*. How many are there in the World to whom God has given a competent Proportion, greater or less, of Riches, Honour, Power, Wisdom, Learning, Credit, Interest; and to some, it may be, a good share of all; whereby they may be enabled to do much good of all kinds, and thereby advance the Honour and Glory of him who has given them all these Gifts and Endowments for that very end and purpose: And yet instead of being *active* and *laborious* in those several Works for which their Heavenly Lord has fitted them, and therefore most certainly requires from them; they often sit still and enjoy their ease, contenting themselves with this one Reflection, that they lead a Life tho' not very useful, yet in a good Degree (as they suppose) innocent; and as long as they are careful to obtain from Whoredom, Drunkenness, Oppression, Extortion, open Profaneness, and such like; which we commonly call *Sins of Commission*; they take their Case to stand well enough with God, altho' they seldom put in Practice the positive Duties which he has commanded; as if they thought there scarce were any such thing as a *Sin of Omission*; or
that

that the leaving of a good Work at any time undone, were a Matter of very small account before him.

After this manner it is evident that a great many do meerly *delude* and *impose* upon themselves: For if we consult the Holy Scriptures, nothing can be more plain, than that the Tenour and great *Design* of the whole System of God's Laws is directed and intended not only to keep us from doing those things which he has *forbidden*, but also to make us *diligent* and *industrious* in performing whatever he has thought fit to *command*. We must not only *cease to do Evil*, but *learn to do well*; (Isa. i. 16, 17.) Nor is it enough for the *Wicked Man* to *turn away from the Wickedness which he hath committed*, but he must also *do that which is lawful and right*, if he expects to *save his Soul alive*; (Ezek. xviii. 27.) And tho' we do not waste that *Talent* with which our Lord has entrusted us, in Riot and Luxury; yet if we suffer it to lie idle, and do not strive to make that use of it for which it was given us, we shall justly incur the Sentence that is pronounced against the *stolthful and unprofitable Servant*; (Mat. xxv. 30.) Neither is it enough sometimes, or occasionally to do that which is good; but we must be *zealous of good Works*, if we would be of the Number of God's *peculiar People*; Tit. ii. 14. And if we are not only *stedfast and unmoveable*, but *always abounding in the Work of the Lord*, then,

and

and then only we may be assured that *our labour is not in vain in the Lord*; 1 Cor. xv. 58.

And thus I have done with the first sort of Men, to whom I intended to apply my Discourse; namely, those who venture to do or omit any thing, without sufficiently enquiring into the Lawfulness of such doing or omitting: I proceed now, in the

Second Place, to those who are more Scrupulous and Fearful than in all reason they ought to be.

That it is the duty of every Man to have a constant regard to the Law of God, in all and every part of his whole Life; is what no honest Man can deny. But some Persons there are of a Pious but Melancholy Temper, who are apt to imagine a great many things to be sinful, although it no way appears that this Law is transgressed by any of them. If they happen sometimes to eat a hearty Meal with a little better relish than usual, or drink a Glass or two more of Wine than what at other times they do, or speak a chearful or pleasant Word, or express themselves with a little Anger and Warmth, or beat down the price of a thing which they intend to buy, or forget themselves a little on the sudden when they are at their Devotions; on these, and many such Occasions, their Fancy suggests a thousand Fears to them, that they have transgress'd the Rules of Temperance, Modesty, Justice, or Piety, or some other Duty which they ought to have observed; the Consequence of which is often
great

great Trouble and Perplexity of Mind, which renders their whole Life very uneasy, and themselves no less doubtful of their Eternal Salvation.

Now the only certain and effectual way to get rid of all this Trouble, and restore the Minds of such Persons to Ease and Comfort, is for them to get full, clear and just Notions of the *Laws of God*, which if once they have, they will presently perceive how far any of the things which create all these Fears within them, are really *Sins*, and consequently to be repented of, and for the future avoided, or otherwise to raise no such dreadful Apprehensions within them. For example (and briefly to run over the instances just now given) all Rioting, Gluttony, Drunkenness, and Excess, or whatever of this sort either injures the Health, hurts the Reason, wastes the Time, destroys the Estate, or hinders either the relief of the Poor, or the performance of any other Christian Duty, is evidently contrary unto, and therefore forbidden by the true *Design*, if not the express Letter of God's Law, and therefore consequently a Sin: But since God has given not only the *Green Herb*, but also *every moving thing that liveth*, to be *Meat for us*; (*Gen. ix. 3.*) and even *Wine to make glad the Heart of Man*, as well as *Bread to strengthen it*; (*Psal. civ. 15.*) and has not only implanted in our very Nature both an Appetite to desire, and a Sense to be pleased with these his Blessings, but also expressly assured us,
that

that every Creature of his is good, and nothing to be refused if it be received with Thanksgiving; (1 Tim. iv. 4.) since also moderate and chearful Feasting is a thing that was not only permitted and frequently practised, but also enjoined by God unto his People, (Deut. xxvii. 7.) and, if not abused, is by long experience found to be an Excellent Instrument, for the creating as well as preserving of Love, and Friendship amongst Men; for which reason our Blessed Saviour himself did not only vouchsafe his presence at a Marriage-Feast in *Cana of Galilee*, but also wrought a Miracle to supply the Guests with Wine when they wanted it: (*John. ii. 1, &c.*) If according to my Circumstances I freely make use of this Liberty, which a Gracious and Merciful God has given me; and that without any wrong done to my Health, my Reason, my Family, or my Poor or Rich Neighbour, or giving any Scandal, or neglecting other Duties, or setting my Affection upon these Enjoyments, so as not to be willing to part with them, or from them, whenever the same Hand that gave them, shall think fit to take either them or me away: If under these sober and rational Limitations, I freely take pleasure in that portion of God's Creatures, which he in the course of his Providence thinks fit to bestow upon me (and that with Thankfulness always unto him that has given them) is there any thing in all this that is contrary to the *Design* of any of God's Laws? And if not, Why should I suffer any groundless Imagination to
D prevail

prevail in me, as if for this, and no more than this, I were to be reckon'd as a *sensual* Man, and not sufficiently *spiritually minded*? As melancholy Persons too often suffer themselves to be deluded by the bare sound of a Word or Expression, without a sufficient enquiry into the true and sober *Meaning* of it, or how far the thing intended by it, comes really and truly under the Rule of any Law of God.

In like manner, That all *foolish talking or jesting*, where the subject of it is *Fornication, Uncleanneſs, Covetouſneſs, Filthineſs*, or any Sin whatsoever, which ought not indeed, with any seeming Approbation, so much as to be *named* (Gal. v. 3, 4.) or even thought of by a Christian; that all such jesting as this (I say) is unlawful, will readily, I suppose, be granted: But since God has thought fit to make Laughter even natural to mankind, and a chearful Temper is known to contribute both to the Health of the Body and ease of the Mind; if the Subject of my Mirth be innocent, the time of it seasonable (as not hindering or interfering with any Duty) and the manner of it such as not to lessen or debase that sober Character, which, if maintained, may be a means of doing good in the World; what Law or Command of God do I break, if sometimes I unbend my Mind, and refresh my self with the diversion of a little pleasant Conversation, that thereby I may be the more fit with alacrity to return to whatever my Duty requires from me?

Again; that all causeless or over-violent
Anger

Anger is a Sin (and more or less so as it exceeds the bounds of Reason) is not to be deny'd : But yet that it is possible to *be Angry and not Sin*, is most evidently supposed by St. Paul (*Eph. iv. 26.*) and therefore may at present be taken for granted : And Anger being one of those Passions which our All-wise Maker has interwoven with our very Frame, and therefore certainly has designed for some good use ; if at the same time I so direct and moderate it, as to level it only against what is really Evil ; and this without Bitterness, Clamour, Railing or Reviling ; and always take care *never to let the Sun go down upon my Wrath* ; is it to be imagined that God will be offended with me if I sometimes resent a Dishonour done to him, or an Injury to my Neighbour, or the Publick, or even to my self ; and that with a little more than ordinary warmth ? Every Man, no doubt, ought to govern his Passions, and keep them in due order ; but wholly to extinguish or root out what is a part of our very Nature ; as it is beyond our Power, so may we certainly conclude, that he who perfectly knows our Frame, neither expects nor requires it from us.

I will not with the same largeness insist upon the other two instances that remain : Let it suffice in a word to say, that altho' to deceive my Neighbour, or take advantage of his necessity in the making of a Bargain, would be to do to another what I should take very unkindly to be done to my self ; and therefore

is unlawful by our blessed Saviour's own express Rule (*Mat. vii. 12.*) yet as I ought not to find fault with any Man for not giving me a greater price for my Goods, or not taking a less from me for his, than the common Market goes, or he can well afford, so (excepting now and then some extraordinary Cases of Charity and Compassion) is there no Law of God that requires me in such Cases as these to come to lower Terms with another than what I might reasonably desire that he should do by me, if I were in his Circumstances and he in mine. And lastly, altho' to address myself in Prayer to God, without a sincere *endeavour* to keep my mind attentive upon what I am about, is most evidently an affront to the Divine Majesty; yet since the Motions of *Thought* are not entirely in my Power; if, notwithstanding all my Care and Diligence, things foreign to the present Occasion do sometimes unavoidably crowd themselves into my Mind; yet since this is without the least concurrence of my *Will*; however it may be reckon'd as a natural Infirmary, against which I am bound to struggle as long as I live; yet will it never be put to the score of my *Sins*; since nothing that comes not within my Power, can ever be supposed to be *absolutely* forbidden or commanded by him who is infinitely both wise and gracious: Nor is it at all to be supposed, that such sort of wandering in Prayer, as we are now speaking of, was ever intended to be comprised under those Expressions

sions of the Prophet, of *drawing nigh unto God with the Mouth, and honouring him with the Lips, when yet the Heart is removed far from him*; (Isa. xxix. 13.) As some melancholy Persons are very apt to afflict themselves.

In a word, altho' there is scarce any Moral or Religious Action that some Men perform, but what is thus interspersed and perplexed with Doubts or Scruples; yet if such Persons could once be prevailed with, to lay aside mere *Fancy and Imagination*, which, being an uncertain Rule, must needs sometimes, and perhaps will very often misguide us; and instead thereof would always have recourse to sober and steady Reason, thereby to make this only Enquiry, *viz. What says the Law of God?* What has he commanded? What has he forbidden? Or what in this Case is his Will? And how does it appear to be so? Is it from any Moral Self-Evident Principle? Or from the plain Letter or Evident *Design* of any passage of his holy Word, rightly understood and interpreted? All these groundless Mazes and Labyrinths, wherein they often seem to be involved, would immediately vanish like Mists before the rising Sun; and the light of Reason and Holy Scripture once shining out, would be a sure and satisfactory Direction to their Conscience in all the Actions of their Lives: No Principles whatever being more clear and undoubted than these; *What God commands we are bound, to the very best of our Power, to perform; what he forbids, we are, in like*
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manner, bound to forbear ; and where he neither expressly, nor by consequence, commands or forbids any thing, we are left to our own choice and Prudence ; neither have we any other Faculty, but that of our Reason, whereby to apprehend or rightly to interpret, all or any of his Commands or Prohibitions.

But some will say, that, notwithstanding all this, yet Experience assures us that in melancholy Persons, *Imagination* will hardly, if at all, be wholly overcome by the *clearest Reasons* : And if after all that is or can be done for the clearing up a Case of Conscience, some doubt yet remains upon the Mind, and will not be driven away, even by the most rational Arguments ; what may or must be done in such a Case ? Or can it be lawful for a Man to do any thing of which such a doubt yet remains ; (*Rom. xiv. 23.*) and consequently whereof he is not *fully persuaded in his own Mind* ? (*v. 5.*) To this I answer :

First, that it is by all Men allowed, that whenever a Doubt arises in the Mind, concerning the Lawfulness of any Action ; against such a Doubt no Man ought to proceed to act, until such time as he has made the best enquiry he can, whether there be any reasonable Ground or Foundation for such a Doubt or not.

Secondly, If after such a full Enquiry, no such Ground or Foundation for the Doubt appears, it is to be presumed that there is none for it, and consequently that it is only the effect of bare *Fancy* or *Imagination*. For the
Law

Law of God (upon which alone all such Doubts ought ever to be grounded) is sufficiently clear to every sober Enquirer who uses all proper helps to understand it : And if after such an Enquiry made, no sufficient ground for the Doubt appears ; it is justly to be presumed that there is none.

Thirdly, If from the Law of God, rightly interpreted, it appears that there is a *reasonable ground* for such a Doubt, it then ceases to be any longer a *Doubt*, and becomes a certain *Rule of Action*, not with a good Conscience to be transgressed, because *reasonably grounded on the Law of God*.

But, Fourthly, If after a diligent enquiry, no such ground or foundation for a *Doubt* appears, and therefore is supposed not to be ; the *Doubt* itself is to be rejected as a bare *Scruple* (which is nothing else but a *groundless Doubt*) and that because it has no reasonable ground or foundation. And whereas God has given us *his Law*, as a Rule altogether befitting rational Creatures, to be the only supreme and indispensable direction of the whole course of our Lives and Actions ; If in any Action of ours, that properly comes under the Regulation of this same Law, we suffer our selves to be guided by groundless Doubts or Scruples, or any thing else but that very Law which God has appointed for our Rule ; we so far in effect forsake that Rule which God himself has prescribed to us, and substitute another in the stead thereof, which neither sober Reason,

son, nor the Holy Scriptures, nor any thing else, except our own deluded Fancy, or it may be Satan, or some of his Emissaries, as a trap or snare, suggests unto us.

But Scruples, like other light things, are commonly restless, and never leave seeking for every pretence that may help to support and keep them in motion; and amongst other mistaken Notions and Texts of Holy Scripture, no small stress is by some laid upon those Words of St. Paul, 1 Thess. v. 22. *Abstain from all appearance of Evil*: From whence some fanciful Men would infer, that altho' an Action has nothing *really Evil*, or contrary to God's Law in it; yet if it has but a bare *appearance* of Sinfulness, it is wholly to be avoided, and never to be ventured upon by any one who would always maintain a pure and upright Conscience; and because this single Text is often the occasion of no small perplexity to weak and scrupulous Consciences, I shall conclude this Head of my Application, together with my whole Discourse, with briefly setting it in its clear and true Light.

By an *appearance of Evil*, then, we may possibly understand either something that is both *really Evil*, and also *appears so to be*; or else what is not *it self Evil*; but is only *thought so*, and that either by a *Man's own self*, or by *others*.

First then, if any thing is *really Evil*, and *also appears so to be*: From such a thing it is
allowed

allowed on all Hands that every Man ought *wholly to abstain*.

Secondly, If a thing appears *to me* to be evil, and I am persuaded that it is so ; altho' I am altogether mistaken in my opinion, yet as long as I continue under such a persuasion, I am bound in the same manner to abstain from it, as if it were really evil. What is to be done in the case of *Doubts* or *Scruples*, I have just now shewn. But altho' the Conscience is at any time Erroneous, yet if it has no suspicion of the Error, but is under a full *Persuasion* or *Conviction* of Mind ; against such a *Conviction* or *Persuasion*, it is allowed by all Casuists that no Man ought at any time to act.

Thirdly, Altho' a thing be really lawful, and I am fully persuaded that so it is ; yet if others do believe it to be evil and sinful ; I am so far bound to abstain from it, as not to give offence to my weak Brother, or be any way unto him an occasion of Sinning : I mean, if I can possibly avoid it, (1 Cor. x. 13). This Proposition is true, but not contained in the Text we now are upon : The Words do not run in a relative manner ; nor is it *here* said abstain from the appearance of evil in Case it offends thy Brother ; but [positively and absolutely] *abstain from all appearance of Evil*. But there are two things here to be noted : The first is, that if *lawful Authority* commands a thing, that is *lawful*, tho' otherwise *indifferent*, that thing during the continuance of such Command, becomes a *Duty* : And tho'

tho' to other Men it may have an *appearance of Evil*; yet their Mistake, or the offence which they take at it, is no sufficient Warrant for me to neglect or omit it. For otherwise it will be in the Power of a few Men, not only by their *real* but *pretended Mistakes* (which none but God can distinguish the one from the other) at their pleasure to controul or disannul all the Sanctions of any human Power whatsoever, so far at least as that they ought to have no influence upon the Consciences even of those Men who judge them in themselves to be lawful. The other thing to be noted is, that tho' to avoid giving offence (or *scandal* as we commonly term it) we may be often bound to abstain even from such actions as are otherwise altogether indifferent: Yet at the same time we are bound to maintain the *lawfulness* of such Actions, I mean if we ourselves are so persuaded of them. For if, without any opposition, we suffer any thing to be generally reputed either a Sin or a Duty, which really and truly is not so; we do not *stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free*; (Gal. v. 1.) we at least permit the *Commandments* [Precepts or Injunctions] of Men to be taught for [Divine] *Doctrines*; (Mat. xv. 9.) and give way to the making of *Additions* even unto the Laws of God. (Deut. iv. 2.) For as he, who asserts a thing to be a *Duty* which really is not so, adds (as much as in him lyes) an *affirmative Precept* to God's Law, so he, that maintains any thing to be a *Sin* which

which at most is but *an indifferent Action*, makes the like addition of a *negative Precept*. But to return from this Digression.

Fourthly and lastly ; if a thing be itself lawful, and I am fully persuaded that it is so ; no mistakes of other Men (who or how many soever they are) about it, can lay any Obligation upon my Conscience to forbear or abstain from it ; except only in the Case of *Scandal*, but just now mentioned. If the Holy Scriptures were silent touching this particular yet the Law of Reason and Charity would sufficiently oblige us as much as possible to forbear giving Offence to any Man. But setting this one Case aside, what imaginable Reason can be given why one Man should forbear a *lawful Action* only because some others, through mistake, apprehend it to be *unlawful* ? And if other Mens *bare Opinions* must in point of Conscience be a Rule to all my indifferent Actions (for if to some, why not to all ?) this is not only a thing altogether groundless, but must unavoidably engage me in continual perplexity : For since experience assures us, that sometimes Men are of different, and even contrary Opinions ; sometimes they change their Opinions, it may be backwards and forwards, and sometimes they are so obscure or undetermined, that it is not easy for themselves, and much less for another, to know, in some Cases, what their Opinion is ; what a dark and inextricable Labyrinth must that Man needs be engaged and entangled in,
who

who thinks himself obliged, in all the common or indifferent Actions of his Life, to be guided by so uncertain, and even inconsistent a Rule, as this most evidently appears to be ?

I know that many Imaginations do often arise in the Minds of some melancholy People, which are very *uneasy*, and no small *hindrance* sometimes to them in the performance of what they *know* or *believe* to be their Duty : But with these it was not my Design in this Discourse to meddle, but only to shew what proper Method is to be taken for the removing of Scruples, and every thing whatsoever that at any time makes us *doubtful what our Duty is, or how far we are left to our own Liberty in point of Conscience.*

F I N I S.

